

November 14, 2001

The Honorable Chet Edwards
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Edwards,

The Baptist Joint Committee is a 65-year-old organization dedicated to defending and extending God-given religious liberty for all. We bring a uniquely Baptist witness to the principle that religion must be freely exercised, neither advanced nor inhibited by government.

In keeping with our mission statement, we urge you to oppose H. CON. RES. 239. This resolution is misguided and unwise. Just as it is not the business of government to compose official prayers, it is not the business of government to direct the prayers of school children. Especially during this time of crisis, our government should respect and honor the shared ideals that are uniquely American and that are protected by our Constitution. Indeed, we are fortunate to live in a country where individuals pray according to the dictates of conscience not the dictates of Congress. As the Supreme Court has stated and we should respect, prayer for our country is a religious function that should be left to the people themselves and to those to whom the people choose to look for guidance in religious matters. Instead, this resolution provides encouragement to those who would ignore the Constitutional separation of church and state in favor of government-sponsored religion.

Americans, including children attending public schools, enjoy substantial religious liberty. School children may already pray individually, pray in groups or discuss their religious views with their peers as long as they are not disruptive. Students already enjoy the right to read their Bibles or other scriptures. They may say grace before meals, pray before tests, and discuss religion with other willing student listeners. Students already have the right to pray quietly in the classroom, except when they are required to be actively engaged in school activities. Currently, students are permitted to pray in informal settings, such as in the cafeteria or in the halls. Students may pray either audibly or silently, yet are subject to the same rules of order as apply to other speech in these locations.

As students have these rights to pray in school now, it is unnecessary to approve this resolution. Prayer has not been kicked out of our public schools. Now more than ever, legislators should concentrate on uniting our nation and protecting the uniquely American principle of religious liberty for all.

Sincerely,

J. Brent Walker
Executive Director

K. Hollyn Hollman
General Counsel